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Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

How pain and heartache
can actually strengthen
your faith





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Click on an article you'd like to read:

3 INTRODUCTION

Suffering 101

By Kelli B. Trujillo

5 LEADER'S GUIDE

How to use "Transformation in the
Midst of Suffering" for a group study

6 WHEN GOD DOESN'T ANSWER

Life's deep nails of pain have
brought me closer to God—
but they still hurt.

By Renee James

11 A MATTER OF SCALE

When I couldn't control a painful
situation, I leaned on the God
who could.

By Peggy Kendall

16 SUFFERING TOGETHER

Allowing pain to nourish your
marriage

By Jerusha Ann Clark

24 MY NEW VIEW OF GOD

How devastating loss changed my
perspective on God and on faith

By Marshall Shelley

**30 PAIN AND THE
RESURRECTION**

Finding hope beyond the "Good
Friday" moments of our lives

By Carol Kent

36 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles, books, and Bible studies
to help you further

Introduction

Suffering 101

By Kelli B. Trujillo



I must admit I wasn't exactly thrilled this past Sunday when my husband reported he'd signed us up for an upcoming class at church . . . on the *Book of Job*.

The teacher will be great and so will the fellowship. But *Job*? It's all about suffering. It's about horribly difficult questions about pain and heartache and God *not* intervening or—even worse—playing an apparently complicit role in that suffering. It doesn't have the ending I want—the ending in which God answers the hard questions and, *poof!*, turns back the hands of time to magically erase all the suffering. No, Job wades right into the deep, dark muck of pain—the muck I strive hard to avoid.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering 101

It's a human instinct to avoid pain, to steer clear of what hurts, to run like the dickens from heartache.

But what Job, and in fact the entire witness of Scripture, tells us is that suffering is unavoidable and inescapable. It *will* touch our lives. It's a "class" we're all signed up for, whether we like it or not.

Will we *learn* from it? Will we grow in and through it?

Much in life can cause us pain and suffering: physical illness, the death of a loved one, the betrayal or abandonment of a spouse, the rebellion of a child, the loss of a job, the breakup of a relationship, and so much more. This TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN download features the wisdom of those who've suffered far beyond what I've experienced in my life so far—the illness and death of children, the repercussions of violent crime, the prison of deep depression. Their candid stories of heartache and their powerful insights about spiritual growth will encourage you—maybe even more than you think is possible in your current state of pain.

Thankfully—blessedly—Christianity honestly addresses the heartaches we face in this life. It doesn't offer pat answers or magical cures. But it does invite us to cling to the God who is present with us in the pain—and to somehow, with God's help, courageously wade our way through that muck and to the other side. And it does promise that, as we cling to God and endure in faith, we will grow in character and mature in faith through the crucible of pain (**Romans 5:3-5**).

No matter what you're going through or how deeply it hurts, remember that God will not leave you or forsake you.

Grace and peace,

Kelli B. Trujillo

Managing Editor, TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN downloads
Christianity Today

Leader's Guide



How to use “Transformation in the Midst of Suffering” for a group

“Transformation in the Midst of Suffering” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

When God Doesn't Answer



Life's deep nails of pain have brought me closer to God—but they still hurt.

By Renee James

I was 18 the night I stopped praying for my brothers. Sean is severely autistic. Niall has Down Syndrome.

I'd tired of hurling nightly prayers for divine healing, or variations on that theme, at my bedroom ceiling: "God, the Bible says you care about healing. Please heal Sean and Niall." "God, what about our family made you think we could handle two handicapped sons?" "Is it something we've done? Not fair!" "Lord, why am I normal and Sean and Niall not? Is there something I'm supposed to do or be to make up for them?" "God, why their handicaps? *Why?!*"



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

When God Doesn't Answer

My words always seemed to bounce off the ceiling and fall flat—words that couldn't move an implacable God. God's non-answer to my "Why?" pierced me deeper than the in-my-face physical nature of my brothers' handicaps: Niall cannot feed, clean, or clothe himself. He will never talk, read, or write. Sean fares little better.

Nails Have Names

Nails—painful, difficult situations that hurt desperately and pin us down—can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Sean and Niall were my nails—sharp and pointed, driving home one reality: God was God and who was I to expect that he'd answer my prayers the way I needed?

Nails hurt. I'd rather pry them out, bandage the holes, and limp far away from the affront Sean and Niall represent to my understanding of God (or rather who I think God is and what his creation should be: beautiful, in order, whole).

But Sean and Niall won't let me pry them out. They are my brothers after all. My mind's eye always sees Sean's twitching fingers, hunched shoulders, and too-thin body in perpetual motion, even when he stands still. Niall's cross-eyed glances and smiles mute the script that threatens to run continually in my head: *God, I guess I'll have to fix all this somehow as you can't or won't.* I can't hobble away from them any more than I can from the unanswered "Why?" of those countless prayers.

Perhaps I didn't know how to listen. Perhaps my faith couldn't accept the finality of God's silence. Whatever the reason, I stopped praying for Sean and Niall's healing. Instead, I grieved God's seeming abandonment of them, of my family, of me.

Letting Go

I resumed praying for Sean and Niall 30 years after I'd stopped. It was during a session in "An Hour on Sunday," Willow Creek



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

When God Doesn't Answer

Canada's 2006 arts conference. Teaching pastor Nancy Beach had just shared about the reward of Sundays for those leading or involved in worship: transformed lives.

"Are we living like Jesus would live if he were physically in our bodies? What are the places in our lives that need to be more like him?" she asked. "What do we need to let go of so that we can discover the depths of God's heart?" As her questions faded, a poignant video began to play of Bill Hybels and members of his team baptizing congregants in a lake.

In that moment, I let go of my need for God to answer my "Why?" questions about Sean and Niall. I turned off the script in my head for good. I looked away from my nails and up at the images of uplifted hands, joyful tears, water. I focused on these images of the big picture, the only picture that matters—life made new, here and now, physically, because of Jesus' death and resurrection. I prayed.

Thirty-year-old words continue to shape my prayers, but I offer them in a different spirit now: "Dear God, thank you for Sean and Niall. Be their daily bread in the ways they need you to be today." "Dear God, you are the Great Physician. Only you can heal Sean and Niall. Heal me too." "Dear God, I don't understand what great work you are doing in my family so help me to be patient."

What Nails Do

In the hands of Jesus, the master carpenter, Sean and Niall have done what only nails can do. First, they've held me and continue to hold me in that place where I identify (in a way I couldn't otherwise) with the suffering Christ who cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46, NIV).

Jeremiah's cries and **Habakkuk's poetry** give me permission to lament; to not rush to the assurances that so many of our hymns and contemporary Christian songs quickly offer. Yes, I



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

When God Doesn't Answer

know that Jesus is coming again, that this world is not our home, and that a new heaven and earth will be reality someday. But that doesn't make injustice or grief any easier to swallow.

Second, Jesus uses my nails to change my understanding of God. Those nails keep me fastened to the heart of my heavenly Father who wants me to come to him and say: "Yes. Nothing, not even Sean and Niall, will **separate me from you**," and mean every word. And it's in that place too that I am slowly learning that God the Father understands my grief because he also grieves.

Finally, it is because of Sean and Niall that I am blessed: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21, NIV). Because of them, I savor the luxury and power of being able to communicate with words that are understood. Because of them I grasp at least one aspect of God's shaping of and call on my life: as theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote, I am called to *mourn* "with those who know pain or suffering and lack the power or freedom to bring it to speech."

Quarrels, conversations, secrets, and belly laughs over family jokes—I will never share those experiences with Sean and Niall, at least not this side of heaven. One day though, I will.

I need nails. We all do.

Renee James is the director of communications for Canadian Baptist Women of Ontario and Quebec. This article was first published on TodaysChristianWoman.com.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

When God Doesn't Answer

Reflect

- *Renee was so hurt by God's apparent silence that she stopped praying for her brothers. Have you ever felt this way? Hopeless? Discouraged? Unable—or even unwilling—to pray about a painful situation? Explain.*
- *Questioning is only human—but Renee intentionally "let go" of her need to get answers regarding her brothers' disabilities and suffering. What might you need to let go of in order to move forward? Are "Why?" questions hurting your relationship with God? Explain.*
- *Letting go doesn't mean skipping past or ignoring the reality of pain. Read **Habakkuk 3:16–19** and **Matthew 27:46**. Have you ever felt like this? Why is it significant that Scripture validates mourning, grief, and other expressions of pain? Why is it spiritually healthy to acknowledge the reality of pain and heartache?*
- *Renee's painful situation hasn't gone away—and it still hurts. Often suffering is like that. What spiritual benefits can you experience even in the reality of ongoing pain and suffering?*

A Matter of Scale



When I couldn't control a painful situation, I leaned on the God who could.

By Peggy Kendall

It was late at night as I quietly sat in my small chair, listening to the muted humming of the monitors, the hushed conversations in the hallway, and the rhythmic puffs of air that allowed my son to breathe. It was in that dark room that I found myself feeling completely and utterly overwhelmed. And, honestly, I didn't like it.

For the past 20 years, I had been the tough one. I had helped my son survive heart attacks, seizures, surgeries, pneumonias, and a life of severe handicaps and challenges. The more we went through, the tougher we got. And although things were never easy, as a Christian I knew they would always turn out okay in the end.

But this time things were different. This time our problems felt just *too big*.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

A Matter of Scale

Learning Through Pain

My son, Aaron, was no stranger to challenges. As a result of a childhood brain injury, he was completely dependent on others to meet his daily needs. The beautiful thing about Aaron, however, was that he was truly a beam of sunshine. With curly red hair and a face full of freckles, his smile was a gift he freely shared with everyone he met. As Aaron's mom, I quickly learned important lessons. I learned that everything took way more time and energy than I originally planned. I learned that handicapped parking spaces were never wide enough. And I learned that our lives were always one step away from chaos.

As a Christian, I also learned important spiritual lessons. I learned that God was faithful. I learned that God had my back. And I learned that his plans were, ultimately, bigger and better than anything I could ever imagine.

A Diminished God

I contemplated these lessons as I sat in Aaron's darkened ICU room. Even though he had been admitted into the hospital with a chest cold, things had escalated and he now was struggling to adapt to a new tracheotomy tube. In other words, from this point on, Aaron would have to breathe through a tube in his throat. This little tube was singlehandedly taking away the comfortable and meaningful life he had grown to enjoy. Because his group home was not set up to provide advanced tracheotomy care, he would not be allowed to go back to his friends, his specially painted room, or his loving caregivers. And if that wasn't bad enough, the state of Minnesota wouldn't pay for another group home and was making arrangements to send him to a nursing home over 100 miles away.

Whichever way I looked at it, Aaron's future felt hopeless. No matter how hard I prayed or how loudly I complained, there was simply nothing I could do.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

A Matter of Scale

Looking back, I can see that my problem was not a lack of faith; it was a crisis of scale. I believed that God was faithful and he loved Aaron, but when it came right down to it, I did not believe God was big enough to solve *this*. My undersized perspective was not a new revelation, but rather the result of an ongoing process.

Without me noticing, my view of God had slowly and quietly diminished. My days had become more structured and pre-planned, and my relationships had become more predictable. With the help of technology like iPhones and Facebook, I had begun to act like I actually had some control over my little world. The good part was, as long as I didn't take too many chances, I was confident we could make it through the daily challenges. The bad part was that as I tried so hard to maintain control, I ended up simply reducing and flattening the truly awesome, uncontrollable parts of life.

Whether it was the way I compacted rich relationships into little text messages on a screen or compressed the Creator of the universe to fit within my allotted 15-minute quiet time, I had traded in an understanding of an awesome, deep, and exciting life for something a little more artificial and a little less big. And here's the problem with a life that is controlled and a God who is manageable: When things fall apart, there is nowhere to turn. When God is too small, my problems are simply too big.

Big Enough

During Aaron's hospitalization, relentless feelings of worry and sorrow drew me to the Old Testament Book of Job. I believe Job was faced with the same challenge of trying to regain control of his little world. As he sat for days mourning the **loss** of his family and possessions, he undoubtedly felt overwhelmed and didn't know what he was supposed to do to make it stop hurting.

Certainly his friends tried to explain why things happened and what should be done about it, but the real beauty of the book



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

A Matter of Scale

comes at the very end. After his friends turned silent, Job turned his face toward heaven. The answer God gave was not about theology or a list of things for Job to fix. Instead, God responded to Job's distress by describing the size of his creation (see **Job 38–41**). God reminded Job of how truly awesome God himself was. He reminded Job that it really was a matter of scale.

As Aaron's stay in the ICU came to a close, I began to see things differently. Instead of cornering social workers, guilting group homes, calling prayer lines, Tweeting prayer requests, and flooding Facebook with prayer updates, I began to rest in the arms of a mighty God. I spent long walks in solitude, worshiping and meditating on the powerful God I serve. And you know, the bigger my view of God became, the less I worried. The more I saw his majesty, the more I saw his hand at work. And the more I acknowledged his power, the less I agonized about my options.

Aaron eventually moved to a facility that was far from my protective arms. The beautiful thing was that Aaron was in God's arms. When my sweet son died unexpectedly on a sunny afternoon one month later, I once again ran to the God of the universe. I knew that he was big enough to help me through the dark days to come.

The thing I have come to realize is that when I start to feel overwhelmed, that's when I need to be reminded of who God really is. After all, the God who put the mountains in place, arranged the stars in space, and counts the hairs on my head is the God who I can trust. When it comes to my Christian faith, scale really does matter.

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Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

A Matter of Scale

Reflect

- *Peggy writes that, while her son struggled in the ICU, she realized, "my problem was not a lack of faith; it was a crisis of scale. I believed that God was faithful and he loved Aaron, but when it came right down to it, I did not believe God was big enough to solve this." Can you relate? When have problems or pain in your life felt just too big, even for God? Explain.*
- *Reflect on **Job 38–41**. In response to Job's searing pain, God stunningly reminded Job of God's bigness and power. Do you need such a reminder? Where in your life do you see evidence of God's grandeur and omnipotence?*
- *How could intentional time with God in silence, solitude, worship, and trust help you through a difficult time in your life? What choice can you make to create space for that type of interaction with God today or this week?*

Suffering Together

Allowing pain to nourish your marriage

By Jerusha Ann Clark



I'm not sure how long Jeramy and I sat in the hospital parking lot. It might have been 15 minutes; it could have been forever. The bitter cold of a Colorado winter wrapped its arms around our silver Jetta, scattering ice crystals on the windows. Maybe on a different night they would have been beautiful to me.

For me, any response to the world would have been a welcome relief. I hadn't been able to carry on a normal conversation in weeks. Often Jeramy would catch me staring off into space, but when I "came to," I could explain neither where I'd been nor what I'd been thinking. As far as I can remember, I only thought, breathed, and lived pain during those hellish days.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

St. Stephen's loomed in the not-so-distant foreground. It was one of those 70s-style concrete psychiatric hospitals that looks more like a communist tenement than a place of healing.

I had been placed in a 5150, a psychiatric hold for people who are a danger to themselves and others. The social worker who did my intake evaluation told Jeremy that based on her 20-plus years of experience, I was suffering from the most severe level of postpartum depression possible. They let Jeremy drive me from the ER to St. Stephen's, but he had to leave me there—alone. Not until years later did he tell me that he wept for the entire 40-minute drive home.

Neither of us knew what to do. Neither of us felt comfort from Bible promises for those in pain. Neither of us could pray with any conviction of hope. We knew God was there, but he seemed distantly cold. The pain was wreaking havoc on our marriage.

We were Christian authors, a pastor and pastor's wife, a couple who wanted to honor God with life and marriage. But we were in agony. Up to this point, we didn't understand what it meant to suffer together, and—to tell you the truth—we didn't want to learn how to let God walk us through the **valley of the shadow of death** together. We would gladly have traded what authors have deemed the "gift of suffering." And yet we would have missed the very things that have shaped our marriage and ministry in the most powerful ways.

An Era of Pain

It seems as if every marriage is hurting during these difficult times. Several of our closest friends are facing financial ruin. Husbands and wives are looking at one another across the dinner table, wondering how their relationship dissolved into an endless string of loveless, lifeless days. Two couples we're close to are going through divorce and custody battles. Infertility is robbing those we love of the joy they desperately want to experience.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

The children of our friends are straining their parents' marriages with choices to live alternative lifestyles, to cohabitate—seemingly without guilt—to stridently abandon the faith of their youth. The death of loved ones, cancer, teen pregnancy, horrific violence in elementary schools—it's hitting everyone we know. We live with the constant awareness of deep suffering.

Christians may understand this on an intellectual level: "When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow" (**James 1:2-3**). We want to do this. But did anyone ever teach you *how* to suffer as a couple? Our premarital counseling didn't address it, and we had the "best of the best" mentoring us. What we've come to realize is that the joy of suffering together can be won only by actually *suffering together*.

Since we fought the battle against postpartum depression, Jeramy and I have faced other pains: a best friend's betrayal, suffocating challenges at work, confusion about the future of our work and ministry, my diagnosis with fibromyalgia, the murder of a family member. Life overflows with pain, doesn't it? But what we've learned about suffering together has changed the way we face pain.

We choose—though we don't always do it well—to let suffering together unite us and bless others.

The Hidden Invitations in Suffering

Although most of us have figured out there's no perfect, one-size-fits-all formula for how to suffer with our spouses, we also know that our Father gave something far better—his Holy Spirit, the Comforter, God's indwelling presence to guide and guard. The Spirit who walks alongside us picks us up when we stumble and screw things up and ache from the consequences of our sin or the



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

awful, uncontrollable circumstances we never could have planned for. The Spirit who guides us directs tenderly and compassionately. Suffering is an invitation to know the Spirit on a level more preciously intimate and real. Do you want this? Will you walk with your spouse through pain to experience it?

Suffering together produces fellowship with Jesus, God the Son, who agonized here and understands well our pain. I love *The Message* translation of **Hebrews 4:15-16**: "We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help." His mercy is there for you and your spouse. Do you ache for it? Will you reach out for it together? Jeremy and I have had to *choose* this. It hasn't happened naturally. Every one of the pains we've faced together has extended us two invitations: draw close to one another through Jesus or allow the wedge of anguish to drive us apart.

Suffering together is likewise an invitation to know the character of God the Father, not as a list of Sunday-school attributes, but as the very life and breath of our marriage. Grace, peace, hope, goodness, faithfulness—these are not resources God metes out. They are the incarnation of his person within us. Love isn't merely a characteristic of God; it is the very essence of his power and presence, pouring himself into you and through you to your spouse.

I realize that very few of us would opt to know God through the agony of suffering. But as A. W. Pink wrote, the truth is "the promises of God never shine as brightly as in the furnace of affliction." You and your spouse, suffering together, can know the truth of who God is in a way that would not have been possible on a road unmarked with pain.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

But How Do We Do That?

Okay, so we don't have a formula. We're invited to know God on a deeper level. But how do we walk—day by day—through the pain?

Jeramy and I, not only in our battle with postpartum depression, but also in the anguish of various broken dreams, unmet expectations, and delayed hopes, have discovered some practical helps for suffering together. Perhaps these three principles will encourage you.

1. Offer one another the gift of presence. Suffering often drives couples apart, and it's far easier to stay a few extra hours at work than come home to a house in chaos, a house filled with pain. It's easier to check out emotionally than to talk to one another about what you're facing. But, just as Emmanuel—*God with us*—models, we are called to be present to and for one another.

The Greek verb tense used in **Galatians 6:2**, "Share each other's burdens," might be better translated "Keep on sharing one another's burdens." You can share in carrying the burden only if you are present with one another.

It takes so little: holding her hand, speaking a word of respect to him, offering to serve in a way that enlivens and unites the two of you. I remember the night Jeramy came home from Wal-Mart with two movies I loved as a kid: *The Three Amigos* and *Ghostbusters*. All we did was sit on the couch together and watch. I could barely laugh. I'm not even sure—to this day—what Jeramy was thinking. But he was next to me; he spoke love to me without words. He was present with me.

After I was physically and mentally stable, Jeramy needed to work through anger, resentment, and confusion about what we'd gone through. I listened, trying as far as I was able to be present with him.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

2. Choose to press in. All of us would like to end our suffering right away. Who wants to prolong pain? Often, we think that rushing through the valley of the shadow would be best for everyone involved. Instead of trying to escape or just "get through this," what if you pressed into what the pain says about you, your spouse, your marriage, and your God?

Jeramy and I went through months of therapy—together and individually. During one of the sessions, my counselor asked that I read **Matthew 5:4** aloud. "God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted." I parroted the words, not feeling blessed in the slightest. She asked me what the verse meant. *Seriously?* I thought. *I just got out of a psychiatric hospital! You want me to exegete Scripture?* I looked at the words again, and it hit me with ferocity. Tears of illumination burned in my eyes. "I have to go through the mourning to get the comfort, don't I?" Yes. Yes. We cannot escape the pain, but we can allow it to lead us further up and further in.

It didn't happen all at once, but slowly, as Jeramy and I pressed into the pain rather than avoiding it, we found that we were not alone there. Jesus was with us and we *experienced* it, not just "knew it." And as we grew in intimacy with Christ, we grew in intimacy with one another.

3. Remember the days of your suffering. Over the years, **Lamentations 3** has become a beloved passage of Scripture for Jeramy and me. This portion of God's Word is most famous for its declaration that "Great is his faithfulness; his mercies begin afresh each morning" (**verse 23**).

Perhaps it's been a while since you read what comes before and after this beautiful assurance. In verse 1, the prophet Jeremiah wails, "I am the one who has seen the afflictions that come from the rod of the LORD's anger." You do not need to bury the memory of your suffering. Indeed, you *cannot*. The memory of his anguish



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

was what allowed Jeremiah to shout, "Yet I still dare to hope when I remember this: The faithful love of the LORD never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is his faithfulness" (3:21–23).

This can be your experience, too. As you and your spouse allow the memory of your pain to nourish your marriage and spill out of your relationship into the lives of those around you, you will be able to help others see "No one is abandoned by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow" (3:31–33).

Perhaps it's difficult for you to imagine exactly *how* remembering your suffering as a couple can help anyone else. Here are a couple of ways that have worked in our marriage. Together, we actively remember significant dates. We choose to recall the day I was admitted to the hospital. We remember the moments in therapy—individual and couple—when God broke through our suffering in order to heal. We don't try to erase those memories. We embrace them as ways to recall God's faithfulness.

Letting God use your memory and your openness isn't always easy. But it is true and good and beautiful. And, as is so often the case, allowing God to use us becomes every bit as significant a blessing and source of healing for us as it is for those we desire to bless. Picture this for a moment: how different might the world be if all of our marriages proclaimed the truth that pain can heal, unite, be transformed into praise, and bless the body of Christ that is wounded in so many ways?

Our hope as a couple, and my prayer through these words you've read, is that God will comfort your marriage with the comfort he has given ours.

Indeed, in *everything* we can choose to say, "All praise be to the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Suffering Together

that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us" (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

May it be so, Lord, for Jeramy and me and for my brothers and sisters.

*Jerusha Ann Clark is a writer who lives in Escondido, California. She is the author of several books including **The Life You Crave: The Promise of Discernment**. This article was first published on TodaysChristianWoman.com.*

Reflect

- *Jerusha Ann candidly says, "[T]o tell you the truth—we didn't want to learn how to let God walk us through the valley of the shadow of death." Pain and suffering are things we are all desperate to avoid. Reflect on past experiences of pain in your life. What did you learn from them? How were you changed? What growth might you have missed if you hadn't gone through that pain?*
- *Jerusha Ann shares three principles that helped her and her husband deal with the intense pain they were going through: giving the gift of presence, pressing into the suffering, remembering the suffering. Which of these stands out to you most in your current situation? How could it help you?*
- *Read **Lamentations 3**. Which words, phrases, or feelings in this passage do you most connect with? Which do you desire to more fully experience? Explain.*
- *Jerusha Ann writes, "Suffering is an invitation to know the Spirit on a level more preciously intimate and real." How is your current suffering ushering into deeper reliance upon the Holy Spirit? How can you more fully rely upon the Spirit in your pain right now?*

My New View of God



How devastating loss changed my perspective on God and on faith.

By Marshall Shelley

Within a three-month period, Marshall and Susan Shelley saw two of their children die. In November 1991, son Toby succumbed to birth defects after two minutes of life. Then in February 1992, daughter Mandy, almost two, died of pneumonia. In this classic article, written in 1996—four years after Mandy's death—Marshall reflects on how these losses affected his relationship with God.

After losing two children, and after four years of reflection, I see some aspects of God's character in much sharper focus than before, while others are still **behind a glass dimly**.

Serving God Demands More

I hadn't realized the cost of discipleship. God assigns some people incredibly tough situations.

Since our two children died, I can't help but pause, and wince, each time I read the Bible and see afresh the ordeals children faced, often at the hand of God. Sometimes his ways are severe.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

My New View of God

In Genesis, at God's direction, Ishmael and his mother are evicted from their home into the desert. Young Isaac is bound as a human sacrifice (though soon released). In Exodus, all firstborn sons of the Egyptians are slain by the death angel. Job's children (though probably grown children) are killed in Satan's test, sanctioned by God.

And this doesn't include the children killed in God's broader judgments, such as the flood of Noah's day, the destruction of Sodom, or the conquest of Canaan.

In the story of David and Bathsheba, the adultery and the murder of Uriah no longer hold much interest for me—simply more evidence of human sinfulness. Now I fixate on God's treatment of the two sons produced by David and Bathsheba's union—one, a nameless son, died as God's judgment on David's sin; the second, Jedidiah (meaning "loved by God"), became Solomon and enjoyed God's most lavish blessing. I ponder that first son's destiny—dying as punishment for David's sin (even though David apparently didn't grieve the death).

In Matthew, all boys in Bethlehem under age 2 are murdered, in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.

In John 9, in front of a man blind since birth, Jesus is asked if this suffering is due to his own sins or to those of his parents. Jesus explains it is neither but rather that "the power of God could be seen in him" (verse 3). A childhood of blindness for God's greater glory? That answer—especially from Jesus, known for his love of children—causes me to tremble.

Ultimately, of course, God's own Son is sent to die upon a cross. Living for God's glory is not for sissies.

The only way I can gaze upon such severe treatment of children, without becoming catatonic, is trusting that God's purposes require a stiff price. Redemption must be ever so much costlier than I imagine. Earth's contamination by sin must be so severe that equally strong medicine is required.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

My New View of God

And even trusting God's purpose, I still occasionally flinch.

Eternity Is Nearer

Before my children died, I considered the doctrines of resurrection and heaven pleasant but remote—a bit quaint. Now, they are central and strategic.

As I held both Toby and Mandy within seconds of death, I was overwhelmed by a sense of how close every one of us is to eternity. I was cheek to cheek with a child now entering everlasting life. That sense, though sometimes overshadowed by the busyness of life, is never far away.

Many times now, heaven seems so much more substantial than earth. My wife, Susan, sometimes says, "I have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth." We've already sent part of ourselves on ahead—and we understand better what Jesus meant when he said, "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be" (**Matthew 6:21**). Our hearts are continually drawn heavenward.

While I still dread the process of dying, the fact that my children have preceded me gives me greater resolve. If my child can go through death's door, certainly I can.

A friend put the issue clearly: "To enter eternity, you must (1) be born, and (2) die. That's the process for every one of us, including Mandy and Toby." After your child enters eternity, it seems amazingly close.

Prayer Is Less Specific, More Intense

After desperate pleas for our children's healing, for the ability to swallow, for lungs to breathe, for an end to seizures—and then to see Toby and Mandy's days on earth end—my prayer life has changed.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

My New View of God

It's harder to confidently make specific requests. It's now clear that God's redemptive agenda may or may not include granting my current passionate desire—even a passionate desire for my son or daughter to breathe.

God's clear answer to our prayers was not to provide additional breaths or heartbeats. It was "Toby and Mandy will live—but with resurrected bodies in heaven with me." If his answer was so much deeper than what we requested, then it's hard not to imagine him also reconfiguring our more mundane requests about jobs, relationships, schedules, and surgeries.

Now, I'm not sure I even want him to grant my daily wish list. What I really want is to see God's eternal work and to be a part of it. Prayer is now an intense desire to know God, to understand his ways, and to see good come out of pain.

Faith Is More Intentional

Do you remember the classical distinction between virtue and innocence? Virtue, unlike innocence, has successfully passed a point of temptation.

Perhaps a similar distinction can be found in faith—innocent faith can trust God because it hasn't seen the abyss; virtuous faith has known the terror and chooses to trust God.

As Abraham Heschel observed, "Job's faith was unshakable because it was the result of being shaken."

Even as a child, I loved to read, and I quickly learned that I would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel. New characters were introduced. Disparate, seemingly random events took place. Subplots were complicated and didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot.

But I learned to keep reading. Why? Because you know that the author, if he or she is good, will weave them all together by the end of the book. Eventually, each element will be meaningful.

At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

My New View of God

Even when I can't explain why a chromosomal abnormality develops in my son, which prevents him from living on earth more than two minutes . . .

Even when I can't fathom why our daughter has to endure two years of severe and profound retardation and continual seizures . . .

I choose to trust that before the book closes, the Author will make things clear. And to remember his words through the prophet: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV).

Clinging to that promise, even when the weight of sorrow makes our knees buckle, makes faith intentional and, I trust, unshakable.

*Marshall Shelley is editor of **Leadership Journal** and an editorial vice president of Christianity Today. This article was originally published in the Fall 1996 issue of **Leadership Journal**.*

Reflect

- *As Marshall's article makes poignantly clear, suffering and tragedy bring some issues into sharp relief. Folkish, magical-thinking "faith" cannot stand the test of pain; Christian clichés disintegrate; new spiritual priorities come into focus. Which of Marshall's observations most resonates with your own experience of suffering? Why?*
- *How has your experience of pain shaped your own faith and your view of God? What might you write in a similar article of your own?*



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

My New View of God

- *Marshall talks about a type of faith that has experienced tremendous hardship—that has seen "the terror"—and still chooses to trust God. What does it take to make this choice? Practically speaking, what does this choice look like on a daily basis?*



Pain and the Resurrection

Finding hope beyond the “Good Friday” moments of our lives

By Carol Kent

The phone rang in the middle of the night and jolted me awake. My husband, Gene, answered, and I soon realized he was receiving devastating news: Our son had been picked up by the police and accused of a serious crime. I couldn't breathe; nausea swept over me. As I tried to stand next to the bed, my knees buckled.

Surely it's a mistake, I thought desperately. But as the hours unfolded, the circumstances surrounding our son's arrest were validated.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Pain and the Resurrection

That day was more than two years ago. My son's still incarcerated, awaiting a trial that's been postponed repeatedly. My life's changed dramatically during this extended wait. I've watched my dreams for my only child shatter. I've agonized over what I could have done differently as a mother to ensure such a thing would not have happened. Sometimes I feel as though I'm living through an endless Good Friday.

When Jesus died on the cross that Good Friday two thousand years ago, hope (for a moment) was ripped away. Everyone believed he would be the one to redeem Israel from Roman oppression. Then his body was laid in a tomb.

But Easter Sunday arrived. When Mary Magdalene and Mary, Martha's sister, visited Jesus' grave early that morning, they discovered that God's angel had rolled back the stone to reveal a now-empty tomb. The angel told them, "I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. . . . Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead'" (Matthew 28:6-7, *The Message*). Because of Christ's resurrection, we now have hope that our faith is true, that God can be trusted, and that we, too, will be resurrected (**I Corinthians 15:13-19**).

If I thought for a moment there was no eternity, no heaven, no end to sorrow, no eventual resolution to my personal crisis, I'd want to "check out" right now. But the good news of the Resurrection is the promise that we who believe in Jesus as our Savior will enjoy eternal life (**Matthew 25:46**) in a place free from sorrow, suffering, or tears (**Revelation 21:4**).

Incredibly, in the middle of my Good Friday experience, other reasons for hope have emerged. Throughout my family's ordeal, I've learned some lessons that have shown me the same power that brought Jesus Christ back to life is available to us.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Pain and the Resurrection

Authentic Joy

I didn't expect this first discovery. In the nights immediately following my son's arrest, depression overtook me like a relentless dark cloud. I wanted to retreat into my grief and sleep away the pain. Yet every day when I awakened, the sun came up—and with it, a surprising sense of renewed hope. How dark Good Friday must have seemed to those who loved Jesus! Yet I'm convinced that when the sun rose that Easter morning to reveal the empty tomb, hope replaced darkness and sadness. For no matter how dark the night, Christ's resurrection reminds us that joy comes in the morning (**Psalm 30:5**).

Jesus promises us, "You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn into wonderful joy" (John 16:20). The friends and family members who have flooded my life with joy in countless ways flesh out this promise for me. For example, days after Gene and I found out about our son, the doorbell rang. There stood a local florist delivering 12 long-stemmed yellow roses. I opened the accompanying note: "You once told us yellow flowers brighten any room. We thought you might need a touch of yellow in your life right now." The note was signed with love from two of my sisters. They had transformed words meant as decorating advice into a gift of joy in my time of crisis! From that point on, my family and friends used yellow—yellow cards, yellow candles, yellow gift-wrapped surprises—to remind me of the Resurrection joy that's available to me in the middle of my journey.

Recently, my close friend Cathy lost her job for the second time within a year. Cathy's a single woman with rent and mounting bills to pay. Last week she wrote, "To me the Resurrection means having God's joy inside me no matter what's going on outside me. When I think of the events leading to the Resurrection—Jesus' beatings, crucifixion, and slow, torturous death—I remember that as I await the right job to surface, I must crucify any negative or



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Pain and the Resurrection

angry thoughts and words, and resurrect them as God's peaceful, joyful alternatives." Cathy is living out the Resurrection's good news.

A Faithful Companion

Christ's resurrection ensures that when we enter into a relationship with God as our Father, we have a relationship with someone who'll never leave us. Recently I spent several hours with a family of three children who are being raised by their mother. The eldest daughter, Anne, burst into tears as she blurted out, "I'm so angry at my father for leaving us, but I'm even angrier at myself for needing him!" I was able to say confidently as I hugged her, "I know you're hurting because you want to experience your father's love. But you have a relationship with Jesus, who won't ever walk out on you. Remember, Anne, God promises in **Hebrews 13:5** that he will never leave you or forsake you."

Power to Overcome

I'd always tried to do my best for God, but when my son was incarcerated, I was humiliated, embarrassed, and ashamed. I felt as though I was a failure as a mother! It was all about me—*my* hurt, *my* pain, *my* devastation, *my* reputation. Only when I looked at my circumstances through the lens of Jesus' death and resurrection did I experience the hope Jesus offers because he arose from the dead.

My friend Nan has stage-4 cancer. She's had all the chemotherapy and radiation she can physically endure. Nan cherishes each day as a valued gift from God. She called recently and enthusiastically said: "I just got off the phone with a telemarketer."

I responded with derision, "Oh, I have a gift for getting rid of those callers quickly."

Nan said, "You don't understand. I told her I'd answer her questions if she'd answer mine. After responding to her questions,



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Pain and the Resurrection

I asked her if she knew for sure she'd go to heaven if she died unexpectedly. She said, 'No, but I've had a lot of fear about that.'"

Nan shared the gospel: that because Jesus died and rose again, there's hope and a future to all who believe in him. At the end of their conversation, the telemarketer followed Nan in a prayer to invite Jesus to be her Savior.

Nan's discovered the *real* power of the Resurrection—that even when our life is interrupted by physical limitations, we can make a difference for all eternity. "Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now!" (1 Peter 1:3, *The Message*).

That's the bottom line: There's no situation, no obstacle Christ's resurrection doesn't empower us to overcome, whether it's divorce, infertility, unemployment, depression, cancer, relationship struggles, or fear for our children's future in a world that's rocked by terrorism.

Freedom from Fear

Stacey came into my life unexpectedly. I spoke at a church in Honolulu not long after the September 11th tragedy, and following my presentation, she asked if we could talk. She explained that she was a flight attendant for United Airlines; Boston's Logan Airport was her base of operations. "I usually worked one of the flights that hit the World Trade Center, but September 11 was my day off," she said. "I've been so afraid, I took a leave of absence from my job and returned to my home here. I've come to this church to find out how to deal with my fear." I explained to Stacey that because Jesus died for our sins and rose again, God provided a way for us to find forgiveness, hope, and a future free from fear. That day Stacey invited Jesus to come into her life. Her face beamed as she looked up following that prayer.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Pain and the Resurrection

The good news of the Resurrection is not only about Easter Sunday—it is a hope that can sustain us, each day, no matter what we're going through. The good news of the Resurrection means forgiveness of sin, hope for the future, staying power for the tough times, a Father who loves us, eternal life, authentic joy, and freedom from fear. When we get to know the risen Christ personally, we can find hope and joy even in the midst of our own dark and painful Good Fridays.

Carol Kent is a best-selling author, speaker, and ministry leader. This article, originally called "Good News About the Resurrection," was first published in the March/April 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN. www.carolkent.org.

Reflect

- *Take time now to prayerfully reflect on **Matthew 27:11–28:20**. As you do, consider what the experience of Jesus' crucifixion, the next day of hiding and loss, and finally the Sunday of resurrection must have been like for his close friends and disciples. In what ways can you relate to those emotions, questions, or fears?*
- *Carol emphasizes the surprising ways God has brought joy to her life despite her heartache. Have you experienced joy? Does joy seem possible to you? How is deep spiritual joy different from fleeting emotional happiness?*
- *What could a mindset of Resurrection-hope look like for you, even in the midst of pain or suffering? In light of all you've read in this download, how do you feel God is prompting you to grow in faith and hope as you endure difficulty and heartache?*

Additional Resources



Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further

Articles

Celebrate Even in Pain?—*My father had lost his leg. How could I possibly follow the apostle Paul's command to rejoice in all things?*

By Pauline Hylton, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Four Minutes of Life—*God graciously allowed us to say goodbye to our newborn baby.*

By Melinda Weidenbenner, as told to Michelle Weidenbenner, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

In This Thing Together—*Sometimes patience comes only through compassion.*

By Ken Tada, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Additional Resources

Lord, Why Won't You Help Me?—*How I quit whining and learned to depend on God*

By Elaine Creasman, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Passing Life's Tests—*We can learn a thing or two from Esther about handling difficult situations.*

By Joyce K. Ellis, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

A Safe Place When You've Lost a Child—*Nancy and David Guthrie know what it means to lose a child. Through their Respite Retreats, they offer couples the opportunity to process the grief and begin to heal.*

By Corrie Cutrer, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com

Suffering & Grief—*Quotations to stir the heart and mind*

Compiled by Richard A. Kauffman, available on

ChristianityToday.com

Books

A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain and God's Sovereignty by Joni Eareckson Tada (David C. Cook, 2010). For more than 40 years Joni Eareckson Tada has been confined to a wheelchair as the result of a diving accident that left her a quadriplegic. In *A Place of Healing* she shares her current struggle with physical pain and the mystery of suffering in light of a God who heals. If you are suffering any kind of pain or suffering (who isn't?), reading this book will provide you with the hope you need to live a life of joy.



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Additional Resources

When the Hurt Runs Deep: Healing and Hope for Life's Desperate

Moments by Kay Arthur (WaterBrook, 2010). Is there any purpose in our pain? Why does God allow it? Can Jesus possibly understand our hurt? In this compassionate, refreshingly honest study considered by Kay Arthur to be her magnum opus, you'll discover powerful principles to help you walk through the valley of suffering and grief. Filled with wisdom, empathy, healing truth, and hope.

Where Is God When It Hurts? by Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1997). "If there is a loving God, then why . . . ?" No matter how the question is completed, at its root lies the issue of pain. Does God order suffering? Or did he simply wind up the world's mainspring and now is watching from a distance? This book reveals a God who is neither capricious nor unconcerned. Using examples from the Bible and from his own experiences, Yancey looks at pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual—and helps us understand why we suffer.

Bible Studies

God's Purposes in Our Suffering—A single-session study from ChristianBibleStudies.com

Job: God Is in Charge—A nine-session Bible study from ChristianBibleStudies.com

Journeying Through Loss—A personal retreat experience for women from TodaysChristianWoman.com



Transformation in the Midst of Suffering

Additional Resources

Pain in the Family—A download for women with articles and reflection questions from TodaysChristianWoman.com

Redeeming Suffering—A single-session study from ChristianBibleStudies.com

Why Do Bad Things Happen?—A personal Bible study guide available from ChristianBibleStudies.com

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The screenshot shows the homepage of Today's Christian Woman. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'MAGAZINE | BLOGS | STORE | FOLLOW US:' and social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. A search bar is present with a 'SEARCH' button and a 'or browse' link. Below the navigation, there are category tabs: 'faith', 'marriage+sex', 'parenting', and 'church+ministry'. The main content area features a large article titled 'Single Minded' by Lori Smith, with a sub-headline 'What I learned when I stopped focusing on getting married'. Below this, there's a 'living beyond' section with an article 'A Hope for Broken Marriages' by Dawn Zemke. To the right, there's a 'what i'm learning' section with an article 'Share what God has taught you'. Below these, there are four smaller article tiles: 'No Apology' under 'FAITH', 'Surprise Your Spouse!' under 'MARRIAGE + SEX', 'What I'm Learning About ... Resting in God' under 'deeper faith', and 'No Apology' under 'PARENTING'. At the bottom, there are two more article tiles: 'No Apology' under 'PARENTING' and 'Surprise Your Spouse!' under 'CHURCH + MINISTRY'. The website has a clean, modern design with a light green and white color palette.

New Ways to Connect

- **Living Beyond:**
Find encouragement and inspiration through stories of God using women who are living fearlessly for his kingdom.
- **What I'm Learning:**
Share what God is teaching you in the good times and the hard times. Together we can guide one another through the seasons of life.
- **Deeper Faith:**
Grow your most important relationship through spiritual practices.

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